

Enhancing Volunteer-Staff Relationships: Managing Conflict

We will have peace, even if we have to fight for it.
Dwight D. Eisenhower

Mutually respectful relationships are a sound foundation of any arts or cultural organization which has an effective volunteer program. Those organizations that have staff often experience the challenge of maintaining open and productive communication, especially when there has been a tradition of competition rather than teamwork. Often one would think that the staff and volunteers work for two different organizations when examining their perceptions of the organizational climate. In order for a volunteer program to be successful, a spirit of collaboration needs to be nurtured and established.

Expectations of volunteers and staff

The working relationship between staff and volunteers is often defined by the perceptions of one another in the workplace. Neither group has unrealistic expectations, but, both need to understand and try to meet the other's expectations in order to create an open climate of understanding and collaboration. The American Association for Museum Volunteers has clearly defined some of these expectations (see box below). Use this as a guide to examine your staff and volunteer relationships and gauge how their expectations are being met.

In addition to examining these expectations, the volunteer administrator and staff supervisor should sit down together often and assess the organizational climate. The relationships between the volunteers and staff impact the morale and productivity of both. Often paid staff and volunteers view each other as intrusions. Keeping open lines of communication is essential to overcome

these types of barriers. Use the following suggestions and adapt them to your program as appropriate.

- Create a volunteer-staff task force as a forum for exchanging ideas and information on communication issues
- When making organization-related changes, staff members should consult with volunteer leaders or committee chairs
- Invite volunteers to attend collaborative roundtable meetings with other organizations as well as staff. Encourage them to go together as representatives from your organization
- Assure that the organization's long range plan encompasses the goals and objectives of the volunteer program
- Establish reporting systems where both the volunteer leaders and staff supervisors let each other know about projects and ongoing programs—especially when one can affect the other such as use of a particular facility or piece of equipment
- Include social events in the yearly calendar that bring staff and volunteers together

Volunteer AND Staff Training

As we found in the results of our Utah Arts Council study on volunteers, one of the significant influences on commitment is training and additional opportunities for learning. An effective volunteer administrator will consider the initiation of ongoing training curriculum an important aspect of your volunteer program. Never underestimate the value of sending a volunteer to receive training at a conference or seminar. Usually, the results of this training will far outweigh the financial costs. Not only do you have a better trained volunteer who will contribute that much more to the organization, but the volunteer will be able to add the skills learned to their resume and will also feel more valued.

In addition, staff should also receive training on volunteer administration. This training should evolve as the programs change. Some suggestions for curriculum items for this training would include: an overview of volunteerism and the current trends in volunteerism; how the current volunteer program is administered; the recruitment program and how they can assist; communication and management issues; job descriptions for volunteers and possible needed assignments; volunteer placement, evaluation and recognition. The ideal would be to have your volunteer coordinator participate in this

training. Be sure and include an assessment of the training to help evaluate the value of this time spent with the staff.

Mentoring

Another successful tool in enhancing communication and collaboration between volunteers and staff is a mentoring program where the volunteer and staff member work side by side periodically. By using some creativity, you can usually adapt a meaningful mentoring aspect to your volunteer program. This can be helpful to both the staff member and the volunteer as often it will be the volunteers who have more experience and expertise. This technique will also give both parties a way of experiencing the job from the other's perspective.

How Volunteers and Supervisors Perceive One Another

American Association of Museum Volunteers

In the eyes of volunteers, staff supervisors should:

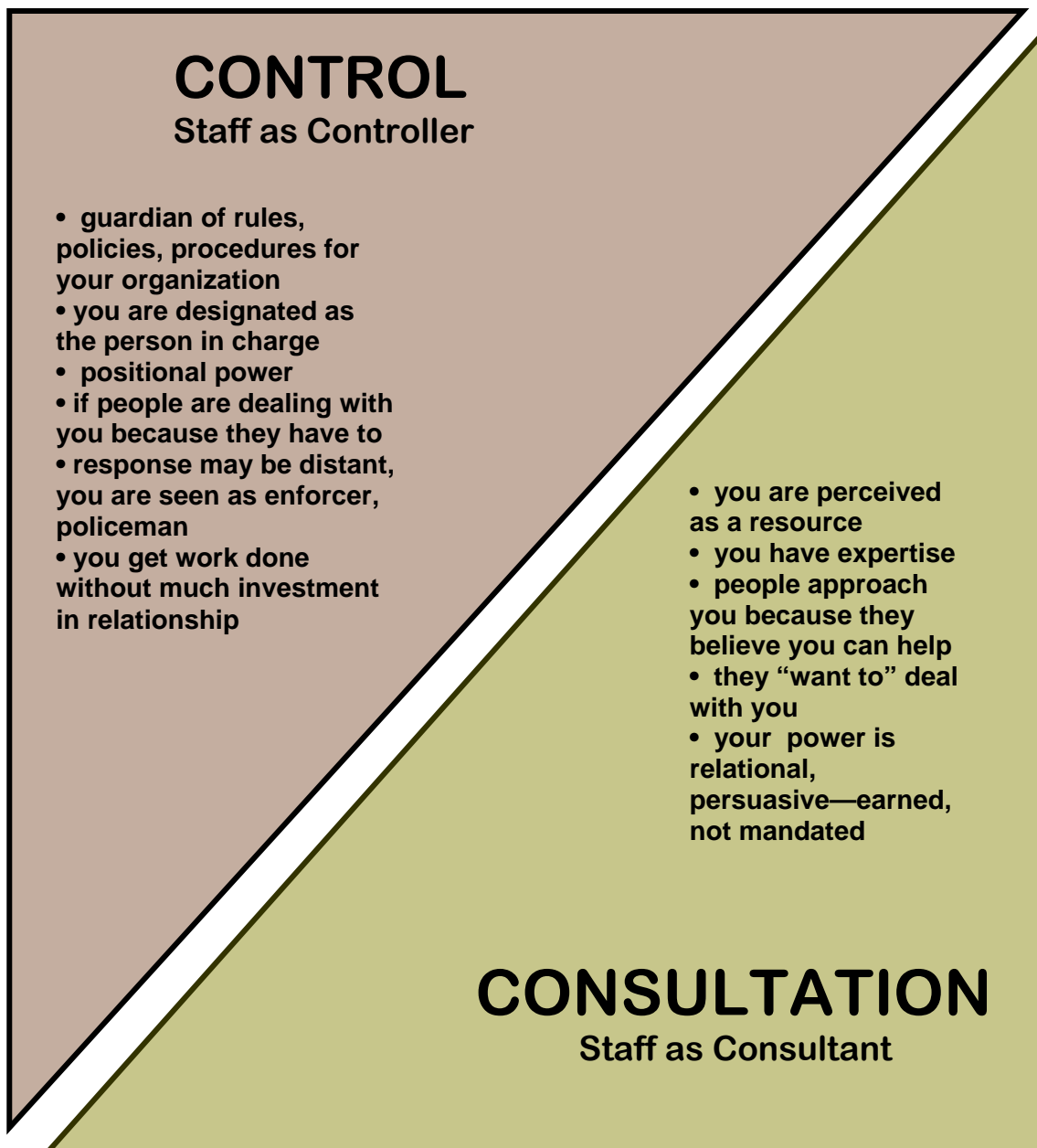
- Explain why things are done
- Be clear about what is expected
- Learn the skill of supervising volunteers; learn how to attract and keep volunteer
- Improve communication skills with volunteers and other staff
- Alert volunteer leaders or administrator to problems as well as exceptional work
- Practice positive feedback and rewards, make rewards meaningful , and make volunteers feel important
- Keep volunteers current on museum programs and policy changes
- Recognize volunteers as professionals and treat them as such
- Set minimum hours and steady time for volunteers
- Learn how to use and train management-level volunteers
- Recognize the limitations that volunteers have on their time because of personal commitments
- Realize that volunteers have social needs.

In the eyes of staff supervisors, volunteers should:

- Respect museum rules as professional standards rather than as obstacles
- Be open to change, new ideas, and restructuring
- Know their job descriptions
- Provide status reports or messages on a regular basis
- Have another option to offer when they come to the staff with a problem or criticism
- Be honest about what they can and cannot do and what they do and do not want to do
- Inform the staff of volunteer plans, activities, decisions, and concerns
- Consider themselves professionals and conduct themselves accordingly
- Be aware of the extreme importance of time: Don't steal it or waste it, but always take it
- Consider the staff's schedules: that staff meeting days are always hectic, that institutional deadlines can interfere with the best of intentions, and that 9AM and 4:30 PM are not good times for conversation
- Recognize that the staff, too, needs support, recognition and praise

Positioning the Role of Staff

According to volunteer consultant, Betty Stallings, one of the best ways to alleviate much of the friction that often results between staff and volunteers is to change the positioning role of the staff from one of **control** to one of **consultation**. The following diagram illustrates the dynamics of each of these roles. Again, you will have to use creativity to adapt this positioning aspect to your volunteer program. As with the other suggestions in this chapter, collaboration with the staff supervisor is necessary for success.



Conflict

Even with the best programs in place to enhance communication, some conflict is inevitable from volunteer to volunteer, and between volunteers and staff members. It has been proven that most people do not like conflict. However, conflict can be useful and often indicates a need for change and growth. If dealt with rationally, conflict can be beneficial for both parties involved. It is important for successful work and personal relationships that we learn to discuss conflict from a more positive perspective. Understanding and learning to manage conflict effectively can greatly enhance one's ability to accomplish personal and work-related goals.

Conflict occurs when the expectations that person "A" has for person "B" are not met by person "B." We cannot place a value judgment on what this conflict means; it is not a question of whether the conflict is "good or bad" or "right or wrong." The crux of understanding conflict lies in the fact that each of us has different expectations which grow out of our unique life experience. Therefore, when we interact with other people whose expectations have grown out of their own unique experience, conflict is *inevitable*.

Cultural conditioning, family life, and social contacts are unique for each of us. We all come to see the world in a different way. Such differences can strongly influence the learning of a conflict management style that is often needed for peer acceptance or even survival. Recognizing the fact that we are each conditioned to respond to conflict in certain ways can help free us from the negative conclusion that conflict is a signal of failure. It is actually a signal that change is needed and possible.

Although beliefs and myths about conflict usually focus on the negative aspects, there are both negative and positive outcomes from conflict. Some negative outcomes from conflict include:

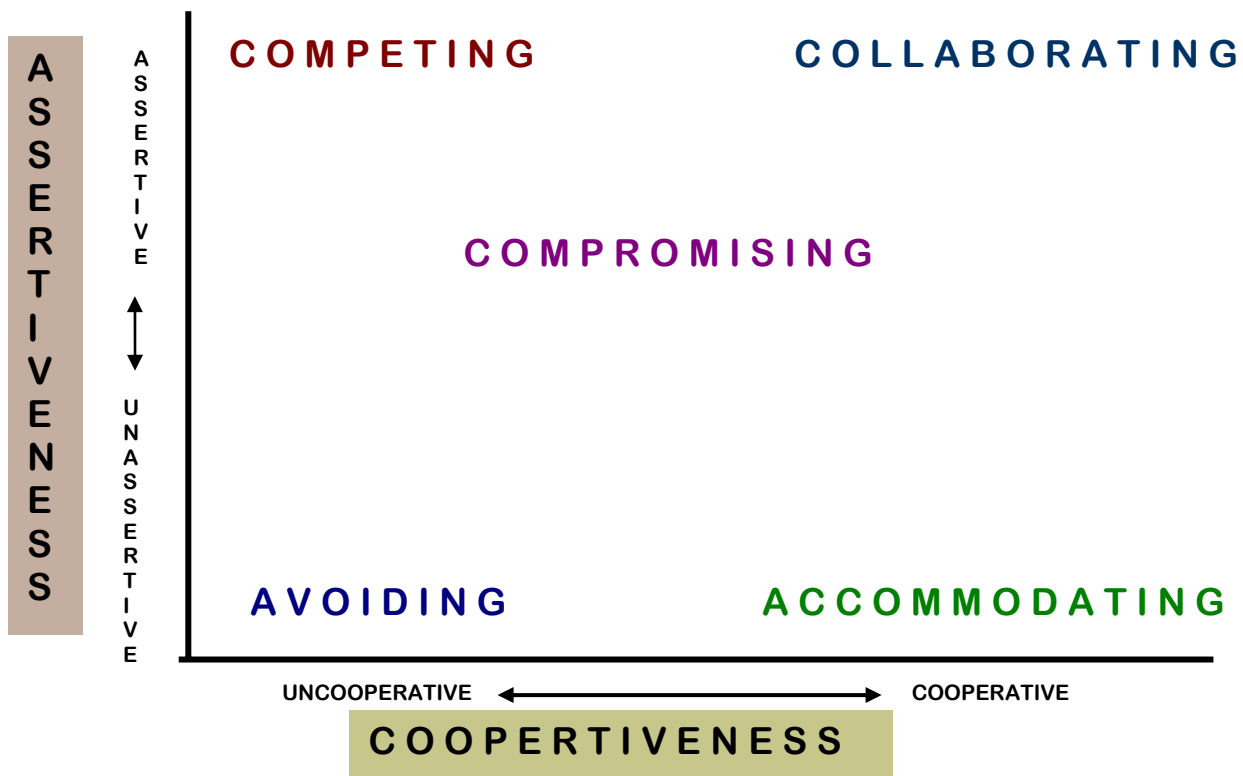
- Decreased productivity
- Relevant information not being shared
- Unpleasant emotional experiences
- Environmental stress
- Excessive consumption
- Decision-making process disrupted
- Poor work relationships
- Misappropriation of resources

- Impaired organizational commitments

However, the absence of conflict can also be detrimental to organizational effectiveness. There are also potential positive outcomes from the conflict:

- Increased motivation and creativity
- Healthy interactions and involvement stimulated
- Number of identified alternatives increase
- Increased understanding of others
- People forced to clarify ideas more effectively
- People more likely to share information in future
- Feelings aired out
- Opportunity to change bothersome things

Whether a conflict has positive or negative consequences is difficult to predict, for it will depend on how the conflict is managed by the participants. The stressful nature of interpersonal conflict makes the situation more complex; hence, it is important to know as much as possible about how we might react to conflict. Each person should know her or his own preferences, strengths, weaknesses, and natural inclinations since these characteristics tend to become more inflexible. One of the most useful models of conflict management was designed by Thomas and Kilmann. A synthesis of their model is shown in the figure below with a discussion of the different dimensions following.



Thomas and Kilmann identified two underlying dimensions to conflict-handling behavior, **cooperativeness**—the attempt to satisfy the other person's concerns, and **assertiveness**—the attempt to satisfy one's own concerns. These two dimensions can be used to define five specific methods of dealing with conflict.

When a person neglects his or her own concerns as well as those of the other person by not raising or addressing the conflict issue he or she is ***avoiding*** (uncooperative and unassertive). When one seeks to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of one's own, the person's style is ***accommodating*** (cooperative and unassertive). When one uses whatever seems appropriate to win one's own position, he or she is using the ***competing*** style (uncooperative and assertive) which is the opposite of accommodating. The opposite of avoiding is ***collaborating*** (cooperative and assertive). Collaboration occurs when one works with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies both one's own concerns and those of the other person. Finally, when one seeks an expedient middle-ground position that provides partial satisfaction for both parties, it is referred to as ***compromising*** (moderate cooperativeness and assertiveness).

No one style is best for all conflict situations. Each style is useful in some situations and represents a set of skills that should be developed. The more alternative styles that one can draw from when facing a conflict, the better the changes for success. All people are capable of using all five conflict handling modes, however, everyone has one or two with which he or she feels most comfortable, which tend to be used during conflict situations.

There are distinct benefits to using each conflict management style in certain circumstances.

It is wise to **avoid** conflict in situations:

- When an issue is trivial
- When there is no chance of getting what you want
- When the potential damage of confrontation outweighs the benefits of resolution
- When one needs to cool down, reduce tensions, and regain perspective and composure
- When one needs to gather more information
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively
- When the issue seems symptomatic of another fundamental issue

It is beneficial to **compete**:

- When quick decisive action is needed
- On important issues for which unpopular courses of action need implementing
- On issues vital to the organization's welfare when one knows one is right
- When protection is needed against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior

It is appropriate to **accommodate**:

- When one realizes one is wrong
- When the issue is much more important to the other person
- When "credits" need to be accumulated for issues that are more important
- When continued competition would only damage the cause
- When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially important

- When subordinates need to develop and to be allowed to learn from mistakes

It is wise to **compromise**:

- When goals are moderately important but not worth the effort of potential disruption of more assertive modes
- When two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals
- When temporary settlements are needed on complex issues
- When expedient solutions are needed under time pressure
- When a back-up mode is needed when collaboration or competition fail

Finally, it is best to **collaborate** in certain situations:

- When both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised
- When the objective is to test one's own assumptions or better understand the views of others
- When there is a need to merge insights from people with different perspectives on a problem
- When commitment can be increased by incorporating others' concerns into a consensus decision
- When working through hard feelings that have been interfering with an interpersonal relationship

Potential negative
consequences of
each style

Each of the five conflict management styles has its own potential drawbacks.

The potential negative consequences of **avoiding** include:

- Lack of credibility. If you are perceived as one who avoids conflict regularly, you run the risk of losing the respect of others.
- Decisions are often made by default. If you avoid conflicts at work ultimately decisions get made without the benefit of your input.

- Unresolved issues—which often cycle back with an eruption after a triggering event
- Energy sapped by sitting on issues. People can become preoccupied to the point of emotional and physical ill-health when issues remain unresolved.
- Self-doubt created through lack of esteem. When one consistently suppresses one's needs by avoiding conflicts it is hard to feel good about oneself.
- Creative input and improvement is prevented or stifled. Often it is through the process of problem solving that personal and organizational growth occur.

The potential negative consequences of **competing** include:

- Eventually being surrounded by “yes” people. If you always assert your needs at the expense of others, people eventually give up challenging your point of view which can lead to extremely poor decisions.
- Fear of admitting ignorance or uncertainty
- Distorted perceptions
- Reduced communication
- Damage to relationships
- No commitment from the other person
- Having to keep ‘selling’ or policing the solution during implementation

The potential negative consequences of **accommodating** include:

- Decreased influence, respect, or recognition by too much deference
- Laxity in discipline
- Frustration as won needs are not met
- Self-esteem undermined
- Relinquished best solution

The potential negative consequences of **compromising** include:

- No one is fully satisfied.
- Short-lived solution
- A cynical climate through perception of a sell out
- Losing sight of the larger issues, principles, long-term objectives, values, and the organization welfare by focusing on practicalities

Finally, the potential negative consequences of **collaborating** include:

- Too much time spent on an insignificant issue
- Ineffective decisions made from input from people unfamiliar with the situation
- Unfounded assumptions about trust

Assumptions Necessary for Collaborative Conflict Management

In order for collaborative conflict management to work, four assumptions must be true.

1. Trust and openness must exist between the parties in conflict (at least as it relates to the conflict issue).
 2. Both parties must want the relationship to continue.
 3. Both parties must be willing to give up their favorite solutions to the conflict—at least temporarily.
 4. Both parties must be invested in their own satisfaction with the outcome **and** equally invested in their partner's true satisfaction with the outcome.
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Steps for Confronting Conflict

1. **Ask the person with who you have a conflict to explain his or her perception of the problem.** Use active listening skills and when the person has finished, be sure to paraphrase what you heard him or her saying. When you paraphrase you are demonstrating that you understand the other viewpoint, not that you are agreeing with it. This step confirms that you respect the other person's opinion and need his or her cooperation to resolve the problem. When attempting to achieve a collaborative resolution to interpersonal conflict, it is important to clearly demonstrate an understanding of the other person's needs from the conflict before attempting to get them to understand your needs. When people feel understood, they are much more likely to try to understand your perspective.
2. **Explain the situation the way you see it.** Emphasize that you are presenting *your perception* of the problem. Specific facts and feelings should be used if possible. Withholding your point of view until after the other person has explained their perceptions is difficult but extremely effective. If you demonstrate understanding *first* then the chance of the other person listening to your perspective increases markedly.
3. **Describe how the conflict is affecting performance and/or the relationship.** Keep attention on the work-related (relationship-related) problem and away from personalities involved. Present the problem in a way that will be readily understood, and concentrate on important issues.
4. **Agree on the problem.** Summarize the various viewpoints and state clearly the problem that you and the other participant(s) think needs to be solved. You would be amazed at the number of times people are in conflict over different perceptions of "the problem." Once both parties agree on this, they can more easily focus on developing solutions.
5. **Explore and discuss possible solutions.** In order to ensure shared ownership of the problem's resolution, all participants in the conflict should be involved in developing solutions. The synergy developed may result in better solutions than any participant would have produced alone.
6. **Agree on what each person will do to solve the problem.** Every person involved must clearly understand his or her role in the solution and accept responsibility as an individual and team for *making* it work.
7. **Set a date for follow-up.** A follow-up meeting allows you to evaluate progress and make adjustments as necessary. People also are much more likely to follow through if they know they will be held accountable for their commitments at a follow-up meeting.

Using Preference Types in Mediating Conflict

Many times conflict between two individuals is based on their different operating styles or types. These conflicts usually occur where individuals have strongly opposing preferences, i. e., extraverts vs. introverts, sensors vs. intuitors, thinkers vs. feelers, and judgers vs. perceivers.

Often the conflict is a matter of priority. Someone with a strong sensing preference, for example, insists on dealing only with the 'here and now,' while someone with a strong intuitive preference places a high priority on possibilities. In this situation, they may both be blaming the other person for failing "to see what's important."

The first step in these situations is to make both parties aware of the different perspectives and help legitimize those differences. Then allow the parties to brainstorm and explore possibilities as well as the realities of alternatives. You may want to have each person explore the problem from the other's point of view. However, often it may be necessary to negotiate a solution using some of the steps previously mentioned.

Another way of looking at conflicting situations with types and functional pairs (MBTI) is to look at the suggestions made in Chapter Seven on giving feedback. Using this knowledge will help you to see how each person is perceiving the problem and assist you in any negotiations. For example, when brainstorming with an SJ, you will want detailed descriptions of solutions with concrete data. At the same time, with an NT, you will want to focus on the process problems and how that could be improved. Perhaps just pointing out to the NT that the process of communication broke down will be sufficient to motivate the NT to seek solutions.

Because conflict has both negative and positive consequences, it is important to deal with the conflict using an appropriate strategy. Thoroughly analyzing a conflict situation is vital to ensure that you choose the right strategy. The following worksheet will assist you in this analysis. Consideration should be given to your organization and your volunteer program. The worksheet can be a personal tool to help with personal conflicts between two individuals or can be used as a negotiating tool by filling one out from each person's perspective.

Conflict Analysis Worksheet

Identify the problem	
Decide which approach may be best/list reasons why. (Avoid, compete etc.)	Approach _____ Why?
Brainstorm possible solutions	
Identify possible preference perceptions	Preference or functional pairs _____ Possible effect on perceptions:
Confront and agree on best solution	
Agree on roles each party will have in the solution	
Set Date for Follow-up mtg	Date/Time: Where:

